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SUBJECT: PILLARS OF JORDAN, S HASHEMITE RULE: THE TRIBES

REF: A. 98 AMMAN 5579
[1](#)B. 98 AMMAN 5619
[1](#)C. 98 AMMAN 5677
[1](#)D. 03 AMMAN 893
[1](#)E. 03 AMMAN 967
[1](#)F. 03 AMMAN 980
[1](#)G. 03 AMMAN 1063
[1](#)H. 06 AMMAN 2943

Classified By: Ambassador David Hale for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (SBU) This is the first in a series of messages that will assess the traditional pillars of Hashemite rule in Jordan.

[1](#)2. (C) Introduction: The three traditional pillars of Jordan's Hashemite rule - the East Bank tribes, the security and military services, and the business elite - remain solid. Barring unforeseeable developments, Jordan's stability is not now a question. However, even among the groups that make up the pillars, there are many critics of the economic, political and social changes that King Abdullah introduced after coming to the throne in 1999. These changes, aimed at broadening the Jordanian system's base of support, inevitably angered some who enjoyed privileges and patronage under the previous way of doing things. Meanwhile, many of Jordan's poor and disenfranchised, who stand to gain most from reform in the long run, also sometimes join in the criticism, chiefly because many have not yet noticed improvements in their daily lives.

[1](#)3. (C) Notwithstanding these complaints about change, most ordinary Jordanians understand that King Abdullah has navigated Jordan successfully through a very difficult period in the region; others merely accept that in the short to medium term, there is no good alternative to the Hashemite family's leadership. Viewed in this context, the three pillars system continues to function even as the King works to introduce changes to it. However, many are complaining about the changes.

The East Bank Tribes

[1](#)4. (C) Summary: Despite modernization's inevitable erosion of tribal traditions, some East Bank tribes are still politically potent, and some of their leaders openly express to emboffs increasingly strident grievances with King Abdullah's reforms of the Jordanian system. Most of these tribes have always been, and remain, poorer than other Jordanians, and less educated. There have always been malcontents among them. But the sheikhs, complaints also reflect the consequences of King Abdullah's conscious effort to make Jordan's political system fairer and more sustainable. At the same time, the grievances are in some cases evidence of the Palace's mishandling of a key constituency. At present, the tribal leaders still need the Palace's favor and have nowhere to go politically, though more of their tribal clients than in the past may support the

Islamists at the next elections. End summary.

Historical Role, and the Impact of Modernization

¶5. (C) The East Bank tribes, especially the tribes that were still nomadic at the time of the founding of the Emirate of Transjordan 90 years ago, remain a key pillar of Hashemite rule. They have long traditions of loyalty to the Hashemites, and many remain proud of this alliance. In addition, a second traditional pillar - the military and the security services (septel) - still draws most of its manpower from both sedentary and bedouin tribes. During several crises during Jordan's early history, bedouin tribal leaders played an important role because of their potential to mobilize followers to physically protect the regime (in the early days as tribal irregulars, and later as reliable elements of the regular security services.) For example, military and police units dominated by Howeitat and Bani Sakhr tribesmen played important roles in expelling the PLO in 1970.

¶6. (SBU) As described in refs A through C, as the Jordanian state and economy grew over the past 90 years, the tribes lost some of their traditional social, legal and economic functions. On the other hand, the polarization of Jordanian society that followed the civil war of 1970 between East Bankers and West Bankers revitalized the tribes, political role among the East Bankers.

The Tribal System Today

¶7. (C) Today many East Bank Jordanians still identify strongly with a tribe in ways that are politically important. Some tribes exert considerable influence as voting blocs, and through the still-strong tribal loyalties of many key Jordanian politicians and security officials. Even among the rising generation of Jordanians, tribal identity is key to politics. For example, a candidate in the recent University of Jordan student government elections told poloff that she and other candidates were assessing their chances of success based on their tribes, numbers among the student body.

¶8. (C) Many tribal Jordanians now live in cities. However, most continue to vote in their tribal areas, where gerrymandering ensures that some tribes, political clout is out of proportion to their actual numbers. In the more cohesive tribes, the loyalty to their sheikhs of these urbanized tribesmen is reinforced by interests in hereditary landholdings in the tribal areas, and by sheikhly patronage. One of the sheikhs of the Bani Sakhr, who control the land into which Amman's eastern suburbs are expanding, recently told polcouns that, even as his followers cash in on the real estate boom, he ensured that urban families did not sell their last bits of rural land so that this tie was not broken. The Bani Sakhr are traditionally among the Hashemites, closest supporters. Their paramount sheikh, Faisal Al-Fayez, was Prime Minister from 2003 to 2004.

A New King and a New Strategy Trim Tribal Perks

¶9. (SBU) The late King Hussein kept key tribes loyal with tens of thousands of patronage jobs, with subsidies and public works, and by means of honors and special attention for tribal leaders. The pork-barrel aspects of this patronage, however, eventually became an unsustainable burden on the public finances. In addition to subsidies to the tribes, the GOJ had to pay for overstaffed and inefficient civil and security services packed with tribesmen, as well as an infantry-heavy army that was at least as much a tribal jobs program as it was a fighting force. This patronage system could only work in a state-dominated economy, propped up by foreign assistance, and it largely left out in the cold the country's Palestinian-Jordanian majority.

¶10. (SBU) Upon his accession to the throne in 1999, King

Abdullah made a strategic decision to modernize. The King's economic reforms have largely been a success, though the benefits are spread unevenly among the population. In 2006, real GDP growth is on track to exceed five percent for the third year running. More Palestinian-Jordanians are being drawn into the regime's business pillar, as a modern entrepreneurial class that is beginning to succeed in the global marketplace. But traditional tribal clients have lost much in the course of these changes.

Tribal Grievances

¶11. (C) Discontent has spread among some tribesmen and other East Bankers who see their traditional privileges slipping away. This was inevitable if Jordan was to rationalize its public finances. Perhaps more avoidable, however, is the sense among some tribal leaders that the Palace has also cut back on the low-cost (but politically effective) honors and senior attention once lavished on them by King Hussein. Tribal figures have disappeared from King Abdullah's inner circle following the dismissal of former GID director Saad Kheir and former PM Faysal Al-Fayez in 2005. The sacking of Amman Mayor Nidal Hadid in May, 2006, also bruised tribal egos. Note: Kheir is from a sedentary Salt area clan; and Hadid's father is the senior sheikh of the Hadid tribe (para 27). End note. The touchier sheikhs have been further provoked by the re-emergence close to the King of their bete noir, the modernizing and Palestinian-Jordanian Bassem Awadallah (ref H). Tribal griping about "foreign" Palestinian-Jordanians sometimes morphs into complaints that the Hashemites themselves are also interlopers, having come to Jordan from the Hijaz "only" 90 years ago.

¶12. (C) These resentments, though not universal, seem to be widespread and raw. For example, it is common for emboffs to hear tribesmen and other East Bankers unfavorably compare King Abdullah to his father, and criticize Abdullah for not visiting tribal notables more often on their own turf. Some backwoodsmen even assert (offering no evidence) that the King avoids tribal visits because he fears for his personal safety.

¶13. (C) At the same time, a few tribal leaders such as Saoud Al-Ka'abneh, a Bani Sakhr sheikh, tell poloffs that their royal patronage continues unabated; Bani Sakhr remains heavily represented in the security services and the military. However, other important tribal figures are quite open in expressing to emboffs their unhappiness with the changes under King Abdullah. Recent conversations with these sheikhs provide a snapshot of tribal gripes:

Bani Hassan - Background

¶14. (U) The Bani Hassan are the most numerous tribe in Jordan, with about 300,000 members. (Bani Hassan are also present in Iraq, south of Najaf and Karbala). Those in Jordan remain fairly cohesive politically. They were semi-nomadic at the time of Transjordan's foundation, and their traditional lands are east of the northern Jordanian town of Mafrag. About half live in the tribe's territory, with the other half in Amman and other cities. The urbanized Bani Hassan keep up strong ties with the tribal home folks.

Bani Hassan - Sheikh Nawaf

¶15. (C) Nawaf Al Eitan is the senior sheikh of the Bani Hassan in Jordan, and is also the tribal leader most willing to criticize the new order within emboffs, hearing. Nawaf is both the uncle and brother-in-law of the chief of the national police, Major General Muhammad Majid Al-Eitan. During a meeting at Sheikh Nawaf's modest home outside Mafrag in March, he complained to polcouns and pol FSN about the influence on the King of "outsider" (i.e., Palestinian-Jordanian) reformers like Awadallah. He was no less critical of East Bank advisors to King Abdullah, calling PM Marouf Bakhit a "drunkard." While Sheikh Nawaf made the

obligatory protestations of his tribe's loyalty to the King, he at the same time dismissed "all the King's relatives and advisors" as "thieves." He characterized Queen Rania (another Palestinian-Jordanian) in crude terms.

¶16. (C) At the heart of Sheikh Nawaf's discontent was his claim that King Abdullah had reneged on the alliance between the Hashemites and the tribes that "made Jordan." Tribesmen could no longer look forward to as many low-paying but secure jobs in the security forces or civil service as they once did. Government subsidies for basic foods and fuel had been cut. And ministers "no longer listen to me" or to other tribal sheikhs. Nawaf was particularly upset over the Palace's decision last Fall to pass him over for a seat in the appointed Senate.

¶17. (C) Unemployment among Bani Hassan youth was "shocking," according to Nawaf. He thought that joblessness, cuts in subsidies and the GOJ's association with U.S. policies in Iraq and Palestine were driving both the Bani Hassan and other poor people into the arms of the Islamists. Most Bani Hassan had always practiced a brand of traditional folk Islam, with no predilection for political Islam or the Muslim Brotherhood, he said. But the Muslim Brotherhood would sweep the next elections among his tribe if the balloting were "fair," he predicted. Note: Elections for municipal councils will probably take place in late 2006 or early 2007; parliamentary polls are slated for 2007. End note. Because of this, he added, it was "foolish" to pursue sincere democratization in the current environment.

¶18. (C) Sheikh Nawaf claimed that the Bani Hassan and other tribes felt alienated from the regime, and (perhaps still thinking about the Senate seat that got away) "humiliated" by the new way they were treated. He complained that the local head of the General Intelligence Directorate pressured people to put advertisements in newspapers praising the King, at a cost of about USD 700 for each ad. "This could feed a family for weeks. Instead of taking money from my people in this way, the authorities should be giving them money." There was "a limit to how much of this they could endure," he said, without suggesting what options the tribes had if the limit were exceeded.

Abu Zayd

¶19. (U) The Abu Zayds are the predominant clan around the town of Sahab, 20 miles east of Amman; they number about 13,000.

Abu Zayd - Sheikh Hamad

¶20. (C) Sheikh Hamad Abu Zayd was a Member of Parliament, but lost his seat to the Islamic Action Front in 2003. At the time he told emboffs that he had lost the election because people perceived him as being too close to the Americans.

¶21. (C) Polcouns met with Sheikh Hamad and his eldest sons in their large Sahab home in April, just as Jordan was bracing for cuts in fuel subsidies, which in the event came off without the trouble that Hamad and others predicted. Hamad, who in meetings with poloffs over the past three years had had nothing but praise for the GOJ, said on this occasion that conditions were becoming "unbearable" for some of his people due to the cuts in subsidies and patronage jobs. Tribal clients were coming to his door in unprecedented numbers for help. "People are angry because they can give their children nothing but bread to eat." The Sheikh's son offered to show polcouns nearby shacks where parents and children slept on cardboard on the floor.

¶22. (C) "Most" young Abu Zayd men were unemployed, Hamad said, because they can no longer get military and civil service positions. He claimed "not a single Jordanian" was working in the nearby Tajamuat Qualifying Industrial Zone (QIZ). Note: In fact, about 25 percent of the laborers in

this QIZ are Jordanian, but few are from the Sahab area. End note.

¶23. (C) Hamad, whose wealth is based on his nationwide bus line, had boasted in 2004 to emboffs about the private school he had founded in order to provide free education to 500 children from the Sahab area. When asked in April about the school, Hamad sullenly replied that he was closing it; he could not longer afford it due to hard times in his bus business. He complained that despite numerous appeals to the Palace, he never got "one dinar" of GOJ support for the school.

¶24. (C) Hamad contended that the poor of his tribe "see no benefit" from American aid. Saddam's oil grants were understood and appreciated by the people, he claimed. People believed that Saddam's aid stopped because of the U.S. campaign in Iraq; Hamad argued the U.S. should subsidize Jordanians, fuel consumption as Saddam had done, rather than provide aid that "disappeared" because it went through "corrupt men around the King."

¶25. (C) The Sheikh related that at a recent audience with King Abdullah, he had pled for medical care for a number of charity cases from his tribe. The King promised him the Royal Court would look after them; according to Hamad Court staffers took care "of some but not others." The Sheikh also saw PM Bakhit to ask for medical aid, but claimed he got no result.

¶26. (C) Sheikh Hamad also complained that after his defeat by the IAF in 2003, he had launched his own political party at the urging of the General Intelligence Directorate and with promises of GID financial support. He had let his tribal clients know they would all get some money for joining the party. No money ever arrived, and the Sheikh had lost face as a result.

Hadid - Background

¶27. (C) The Hadid tribe numbers about 20,000. Their home turf is south Amman. The tribe's senior sheikh, Barjes Al-Hadid, is a pro-government Member of Parliament. Jordan's other tribal leaders recognize him as the country's pre-eminent expert on tribal customary law, and some recently asked him to mediate in a dispute among clans around Kerak. Sheikh Barjes, son Nidal Hadid was mayor of Amman from 1998 until May, 2006. Saad Kheir, head of the General Intelligence Directorate until 2005, is an in-law to Nidal Hadid.

Hadid - Sheikh Barjes

¶28. (C) Polcouns met with Sheikh Barjes at his run-down south Amman villa in April. As many Jordanians do, Barjes combined gracious hospitality with relentless criticism of U.S. policies toward the Palestinians and in Iraq. Despite his objections to these policies, he personally supported the Jordan-U.S. "alliance" because he understood that Jordan was weak and needed peace with Israel and help from the U.S. But it was becoming more and more difficult to convince his tribal clients of this. Barjes said his people viewed the GOJ's ties to the United States as the reason for their economic problems, because America had deposed their previous benefactor, Saddam Hussein. Unemployment among his people was extensive, he said. The impending fuel subsidy cuts would cause even more hardship. Unless Jordan's Gulf and American friends provided new help to "their Jordanian ally," the GOJ had no choice but to impose the cuts and "let the people suffer."

Howeit - Background

¶29. (U) The Howeit number 30,000 and are predominant in southern Jordan; they are nowadays not very cohesive

politically. (There are also a few Howeitat in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.) The film "Lawrence of Arabia" made them internationally famous, with Anthony Quinn, playing Sheikh Odeh Abu Tayeh of the Howeitat, helping the Hashemites overcome their First World War foes.

¶30. (C) Leadership of the tribe has since shifted to the Al-Jazi clan. The current Al-Jazi sheikh, Sultan bin Feisal, is widely viewed as ineffective. Two GID men appeared at his last meeting with emboffs, and the clearly uncomfortable sheikh was unwilling to engage in substantive conversation. The tribe's most active political leader is Sultan's cousin, Member of Parliament Dr. Abdullah al-Jazi, and most Howeitat go to him when they need something from the government.

Howeitat - Dr. Abdullah Al-Jazi

¶31. (C) Al-Jazi is a close Embassy contact who has never directly criticized the King in meetings with emboffs, and he is proud that his eldest son has recently joined the Royal Court's new policy unit. Over the past two years, however, he has expressed increasing frustration with the King's inner circle of advisors, some of whom he criticizes as being "totally out of touch with the people." While admitting that his tribal constituents have unrealistic expectations when it comes to patronage jobs and government handouts - during one meeting with poloff Al-Jazi took a phone call from a tribal figure demanding that his high school drop-out son be put in charge of Jordan's only railroad - at the same time he has gently chided the Palace for distancing itself from its tribal support base. "The King is getting some bad advice - he should listen more to those of us who know what the Jordanian people need and want," he told poloff. Al-Jazi contends that his tribal clients continue to back the Hashemites, but acknowledges that Islamists, appeal is increasing for young Howeitat men who are bitter that they do not enjoy the same entitlements their fathers did.

Conclusion

¶32. (C) These tribal leaders, views provide insight into the challenges King Abdullah faces as he tries to advance reforms and continue his strong support for U.S. policy in the region. While there is likely some hyperbole to their complaints, their increased volume and stridency in recent years is a significant development.

¶33. (C) The Palace might marginally reduce sheikhly complaining if it devoted more time to ego-soothing meetings and other recognition. But most of the tribes, discontent is, in the end, a resource issue, and is unavoidable unless the King were to reverse his reform program, or come into unexpected new levels of aid from the Gulf or USG. Neither development is likely.

¶34. (C) Does it matter? Could dissatisfied tribes or their malcontent leaders credibly threaten to withhold their allegiance from King Abdullah or from the whole Hashemite family? In post's view, this is unlikely in the near term, not least because government handouts, while reduced, are still essential for most of the tribes. Though more tribesmen than in the past may vote for Islamists at the next municipal elections in late 2006, in that poll urban Palestinian-Jordanians will be decisive in any gains the Islamists make; tribal candidates will probably still prevail in traditional tribal areas. However, tribal voters might be more likely to swing to the Islamists if economic conditions deteriorate for low-income Jordanians, or if the situations in the Palestinian territories or Iraq get significantly worse.

¶35. (C) Looming even larger over the political scene are the national parliamentary elections scheduled for 2007, and the King's push for electoral reform before then. Possible shifts in tribal voting loyalties will be among the considerations underlying debate in the cabinet and

parliament over the expected electoral reform bill, and over any attempts to adjust the current electoral district boundaries, which favor traditionally pro-government tribal voters.

¶36. (C) The tribal pillar of the regime remains solid, though cracks are beginning to show, and they bear watching.

HALE